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19 February 2014

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Mughal, M. A. Z. (2009) 'Book review of 'India : The ancient past : a history of Indian sub-continent from c. 7000 BC to AD 1200' by Burjor Avari, London : Routledge, 2007.', *Contemporary South Asia*, 17 (1). pp. 93-94.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09584930802624695>

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India: The Ancient Past A History of the Indian Subcontinent from c. 7000 BC to AD 1200

Burjor Avari

London: Routledge, 2007

ISBN: 978-0-415-35616-9

The Indian sub-continent is spectrum of culture and geography, the history of which reflects the rise and fall of empires, the origin and spread of religions, and the grandeur of art. Comprised of present day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Indian Subcontinent represents one of the major concentrations of the human population on earth today and occupies a special place in world political economy. Given such importance, there is a need to understand the ancient literature and archaeology of the Subcontinent using modern cross-disciplinary approaches to reveal its history.

Avari's approach to the Indian sub-continent is holistic. His account takes us from the pre-Indus Mehrgarh in 7000 BC through the Indus Valley Civilization, the Vedic Age, the Gandhara Civilization, various Hindu and Buddhist dynasties, to the arrival and rule of Muslims from the eighth to the twelfth century. He explores religion, politics, art, architecture and other facets of the sub-continent's history and culture, confining his study primarily to the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Avari builds on the work of a number of well-known historians who have used literary texts, Hindu and Buddhist religious scriptures, archaeological evidence, and findings of multidisciplinary studies on the ancient India. He attempts to explain the history of the sub-continent through the geography of regions and culture. On the way, his discussion touches on Indic terminology, the myth of an 'Aryan Race', change and

continuity in the artistic traditions, indigenous knowledge and technology, agriculture and international trade, Sanskritization, wars between local rulers and foreigners, the caste system, languages and ethnic groups, as well as the coexistence of various religions. In doing so, he describes the culture and history of each politically and geographically distinct area of the Subcontinent in chronological order.

In this book, Avari has been largely successful in eliminating the perception that India has been isolated from the rest of the world by describing the relations of India with Babylonians and Sumerians some three to four millennia before and reporting the arrival of Persians, Greeks, Parthians, Scythians, Kushans, Huns, Arabs, Rajputs, Afghans, and Europeans into the Subcontinent during different time periods. This inter-cultural communication has left a mark on various cultural patterns, but is most obvious in today's language, art and belief.

The marvelous architecture of the Subcontinent's past and other aspects of material culture are illustrated in black and white pictures of temples, statues, royal palaces, forts and other constructions of historic interest. The book also indicates the changing geographical and political boundaries of the region through time with maps.

Avari uses a simple language with minimal jargon so that a general reader can understand the basic chapters in the history of Indian Subcontinent. The thought-provoking questions Avari raises at the end of each chapter will also be of interest to an academic audience. The volume covers topics common to the syllabi of many universities and will therefore be useful to post-graduate students in many disciplines seeking a background in sub-continental history.

Muhammad Aurang Zeb Mughal